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Worldwide.



Highway to Hell

The illegal trade of dogs and cats
through Ha Tinh province, Vietnam

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Executive Summary

During November and December 2022, FOUR PAWS commissioned an investigation to expose the illegal trafficking of dogs and cats through the Vietnamese province of Ha Tinh.

The key objectives of the investigation were to:

- ➔ identify the main trafficking routes and transportation methods of dogs and cats;
- ➔ assess the illegality and scale of the trade;
- ➔ establish the risks to public health;
- ➔ document animal welfare concerns during capture, transport, holding and slaughter.

Investigators documented extensive trafficking of dogs and cats along main highways throughout Ha Tinh, often in the luggage hold of passenger buses, to supply restaurants in the province and beyond. Further evidence was gathered of dogs and cats being transported and held in unsanitary, highly stressful conditions, as well as brutal killing methods being employed at slaughter sites.

This report summarises key findings from the undercover investigation, exposing how the trade of dogs and cats through Ha Tinh violates current transport laws in the country, jeopardises public health, and causes severe suffering to animals. The report concludes with recommendations to enforce and build upon existing legislation, to prevent future violations and reduce the myriad of risks associated with the trade.

Key Investigative Findings

Main trafficking routes and transportation methods

Trafficking routes

Investigators visited three official animal inspection posts along Highway QL 1A, identified as the main route for trafficking dogs and cats from South Vietnam to Hanoi (see map 1). Ha Tinh is considered a bottleneck for traffic travelling throughout the country and therefore many vehicles transporting dogs and cats use this route.

Investigators spoke with official veterinarians at the inspection posts who confirmed that on average, only one truck carrying dogs and/or cats is stopped weekly to have its papers checked. However, based on the evidence gathered, this is likely to be only a fraction of the dogs and cats trafficked through Ha Tinh every week.

Investigators observed the police stop a truck transporting an estimated 300-400 dogs from Da Nang to Ha Tinh. No checks were carried out and drivers were allowed to continue their journey.



Map 1: Map of Vietnam showing official animal inspection checkpoints and Highway Q1A trafficking route used by passenger buses from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi.

Methods of transport

Investigators obtained extensive footage of the transportation of dogs and cats using a variety of vehicles, motorbikes, small trucks, large trucks, and passenger buses. However, evidence suggests that large trucks and passenger buses were the vehicles most often used to transport dogs and cats through Ha Tinh.

In one instance, tourists were seen boarding a bus from the south owned by the same company that was later documented carrying live cats in the luggage hold.



Cats crammed into crates in the luggage hold of a passenger bus.

The team documented dogs being forced into crates whilst awaiting pickup from another passenger bus company. It is suspected that many of the tourist buses that travel daily from Ho Chi Minh to Hanoi also transport dogs and cats in the luggage hold.

An official at the Ha Tinh inspection checkpoint said they were aware of passenger buses being used to transport dogs and cats through the country illegally, but that only the police had the authority to intercept them.

The team trailed a truck transporting dogs from Dong Ha city, Quang Tri to Ha Tinh on an 8-hour journey where they observed dogs being collected and dropped off at several locations along the route (see map 2). This same truck was documented passing through official animal inspection posts without stopping to present any documentation.

Investigators also observed dogs being traded in a building off the main road. There were around 40 dogs in crates being weighed. People were seen exchanging money before the crates were loaded onto a small truck and driven away.



A small truck carrying cages of dogs on the route from Da Nang to Ha Tinh.



Map 2: Map of Vietnam showing distribution of multiple identified dog and cat meat restaurants and slaughterhouses between Ha Tinh and Dong Ha, North and South Central Coast.

The scale and illegality of the trade

Carriage of animals in passenger buses is illegal in Vietnam, however, inspectors at checkpoints have no authority to stop them. The police will only act if they have prior knowledge of animals being carried illegally.

Our investigators estimate that most transportation of dogs and cats through Ha Tinh province is illegal. As only animal trucks are required to stop, dog and cat meat traders routinely use passenger buses to transport dogs and cats, in order to avoid detection by officials at checkpoints.

Investigators were told by officials that carrying dogs and cats on passenger buses is illegal, but that it happens frequently.

A truck was documented travelling through Ha Tinh city carrying between 300-400 dogs. There were approximately 18 crates of dogs on the truck which drove past the official inspection post. The truck was stopped twice by the police, but no physical checks were made despite the smell and noise of hundreds of distressed dogs in the back of the vehicle.

Investigators documented two bus companies and various trucks transporting dogs and cats through inspection points without being stopped. A large-scale dealer in the South even stated that they send several trucks of animals each week to restaurants in Hanoi. However, other officials at the animal inspection post at Ha Tinh later claimed that they usually only see one truck carrying dogs or cats a week.

One dealer said he deals with 300-400 cats per day and collects them from across Vietnam and distributes them to the north of the country. These conflicting reports from officials at checkpoints and dealers highlight that officials working at the posts are not aware of the actual scale of the illegal trade.

An owner of a roadside cafe near the border of Ha Tinh and Quang Binh stated that she sees trucks full of dogs and motorcycles carrying empty crates heading to a service station where dogs are traded daily.

Bus company fined for illegally transporting dogs and cats.

Traffic police from Hoa Phuoc Traffic Police Station discovered a large number of animals being transported without documentation on a bus carrying 38 passengers. Among the animals, 156 dogs and cats were found crammed into the luggage compartment along with the passenger's belongings. 106 dogs and cats were found dead, most likely having suffocated, and the remaining 50 were euthanised. The Department of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Medicine of Da Nang City issued the bus company with a fine of 7.5 million Dong (£250/280 euro).^a

^a Cong An Nhan Dan Newspaper. Passenger bus driver fined 7 million VND for "smuggling" 156 dogs and cats. May 29, 2021. Accessed February 8, 2024 via: <https://cand.com.vn/doi-song/Xu-phat-tai-xe-xe-khach-7-trieu-dong-vi-hanh-vi-cho-lau-156-con-cho-meo-i607332/>

Pet Theft

Pet theft to supply the dog and cat meat trade is widespread throughout Vietnam and has a particularly significant emotional impact on families whose pets are stolen. There have been numerous reports of dog and cat owners having their pets snatched by thieves from outside their homes or from their local communities. Information gathered from investigators highlights this illegal practice is also carried out in Ha Tinh Province:

An owner of a dog meat restaurant informed investigators that he normally sourced dogs from his local neighbourhood. However, investigators observed slaughtered dogs with string collars, indicating they may have been owned and therefore likely stolen.

Gathering information about illegal activities that perpetuate the trade such as pet theft is essential in helping authorities understand the severity of the issue. To help facilitate this, FOUR PAWS recently launched a reporting tool enabling members of the public to report any dog and cat meat trading activities they have witnessed.

The reporting tool is currently focussed on collecting information in Quang Nam and Da Nang Provinces. It will soon be available nationwide, enabling the public to play an active role in saving lives and preventing further suffering.

Public health risks

The uncontrolled mass movement of unvaccinated dogs and cats over long distances in stressful, unhygienic conditions greatly increases the risk of zoonosis. Infected dogs and cats transported and slaughtered for their meat jeopardise the health of both consumers and traders, as well as members of the public and other animals. There is also a significant risk of rabies transmission throughout all stages of the dog and cat meat supply chain.^b

Even where legislation exists to prevent the movement of unvaccinated animals, dogs and cats continue to be transported in trucks or passenger buses.

Investigators documented the lack of inspections conducted by officials at checkpoints, exposing the considerable risk of disease being spread across the country from province to province. In many cases, trucks were not stopped at all, let alone basic inspections carried out. Even if inspections were carried out, they often result in the animals being returned to the trader who pays a small fine despite failing to produce the appropriate documentation.

Investigators witnessed an emaciated, sick dog in one of the crates with a serious skin disease.

^b Publications on the Dog and Cat Meat Trade in Southeast Asia. FOUR PAWS' reports and recommendations. (12th October 2021). <https://www.four-paws.org/our-stories/publications-guides/publications-on-the-dog-and-cat-meat-trade-in-southeast-asia>

Trucks transporting dogs and cats are not adapted in any way to accommodate for the number of animals crammed in metal crates and stacked upon each other. This not only causes incredible discomfort and stress to the animals, who likely have compromised immune systems but also presents a significant hygiene and disease risk.

Investigators observed a driver using a hose to wash excrement from the dog crates and truck floor whilst the dogs were inside. The crates were sprayed aggressively with cold water, leaving the dogs soaked and distressed, whilst increasing the risk of disease spread.

Animal welfare concerns

Investigations documented dogs and cats being subjected to prolonged and severe suffering during holding, transport and slaughter.

Investigators observed:



Dogs crammed into a crate awaiting electrocution.

During holding and transport

- ➔ dogs being poked with electric prods to move them from one crate to another causing extreme pain and distress
- ➔ cats crammed on top of each other in tiny cages in the luggage hold of a passenger bus
- ➔ hundreds of dogs crammed into cages on top of one another in the back of a truck
- ➔ a sick and emaciated dog being turned upside down to facilitate weighing before being thrown back into a truck
- ➔ dogs in crates on a truck yelping and distressed whilst being violently hosed down
- ➔ dogs and cats transported in distressing conditions with no access to food, water, or rest for journeys over 24 hours

The owner of one slaughter site said dogs were killed there daily and that he had been killing dogs for nearly twenty years.



Electrocuted dogs lay dead across a crate.

During slaughter

- ➔ dogs being removed from crates by their necks with steel tongs before being brutally clubbed to death
- ➔ dogs having their throats cut and being bled out before their bodies were thrown onto a straw fire to burn their skin before butchering
- ➔ cats being drowned in a tied-up nylon sack submerged in a bucket of water with a brick placed on top
- ➔ water being thrown over dogs to improve their conductivity before being electrocuted with a 220-volt prod

As one dog was electrocuted, the other dogs in the same cage yelped in pain as the electricity passed through them. The remaining dogs were electrocuted within minutes and then removed from the cages to have their throats cut.

One restaurant owner had six cats in a cage at the back of the restaurant. They said they kill and sell around 10 cats per day.



Cats being drowned in a bucket of water.

Recommendations

Based on the various examples of illegality exposed by our investigation, FOUR PAWS recommends the following actions to help combat the illegal trafficking of dogs and cats throughout Vietnam:

Authorities to enforce existing transportation legislation:

Our investigation findings have highlighted that current transportation legislation in Vietnam is not being effectively enforced. Dogs and cats are being illegally trafficked without vaccinations, licenses and/or permits through Ha Tinh, posing a significant risk to public health.

Authorities must ensure rigorous enforcement of existing transportation laws to help halt the illegal trading of dogs and cats for their meat. It is apparent that in many instances officials are simply unaware of the scale of the illegal trade. Ha Tinh province is a bottleneck for traffic throughout the country and would be a strategic and impactful location to concentrate inspection efforts.

Support for rabies eradication efforts:

Given the grave risks inherent with rabies transmission, the indiscriminate killing of dogs and cats for the meat trade puts public health at great risk. Dogs and cats are being illegally trafficked long distances across Vietnam, from Dong Ha to Ha Tinh, undermining regional and national rabies eradication control efforts. By addressing and curtailing the illegal trade, Vietnam can make significant progress in preventing the spread of rabies and protecting public health.

Introduce a phased end to the dog and cat meat trade in Vietnam:

FOUR PAWS strongly recommends the Ministry of Rural Development and Agriculture (MARD) acknowledges that the dog and cat meat trade is a problem that must be addressed. We also recommend that the MARD collaborate with FOUR PAWS to develop a roadmap to end the trade across Vietnam.

Existing legislation in the country already recognises the risk inherent in the transportation of live animals without the correct documentation. Therefore, FOUR PAWS urges the Prime Minister to review existing legislation to impose a ban on the trade of dogs and cats for the protection of public health and the prevention of cruelty to animals.

Conclusion

This investigation has provided compelling evidence of the illegal trafficking of dogs and cats through Ha Tinh, Vietnam, to supply the dog and cat meat trade. Our investigations have documented and captured extensive footage of the collection, transport, and cruel slaughter of dogs and cats, as well as conversations with those involved in all aspects of the trade.

This report underscores the urgent need to enforce current legislation regarding the trafficking of dogs and cats. In particular, the enforcement of inspections of both trucks and passenger buses by police and officials at official inspection posts. This report also highlights the need for further national legislation to end the dog and cat meat trade to protect the well-being of animals while contributing to the efforts of rabies eradication.

FOUR PAWS encourages members of the public to use our specialised reporting tool to inform us about any dog and cat meat trading activity they witness. The reports received to date have provided helpful insights as to the areas throughout Vietnam where dog and cat meat trading is taking place and provides important feedback to government and law enforcement on the issue.

About FOUR PAWS

FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Heli Dugler and friends, the organisation advocates for a world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding. The sustainable campaigns and projects of FOUR PAWS focus on companion animals including stray dogs and cats, farm animals and wild animals – such as bears, big cats and orangutans – kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones. With offices in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Germany, Kosovo, the Netherlands, Switzerland, South Africa, Thailand, Ukraine, the UK, the USA and Vietnam as well as sanctuaries for rescued animals in eleven countries, FOUR PAWS provides rapid help and long-term solutions.

About TRACKS

FOUR PAWS worked with the agency Tracks Investigations to conduct this investigation in 2022. Tracks Investigations is an ethical investigation agency supporting the work of conservation and animal protection NGOs and charities worldwide.



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